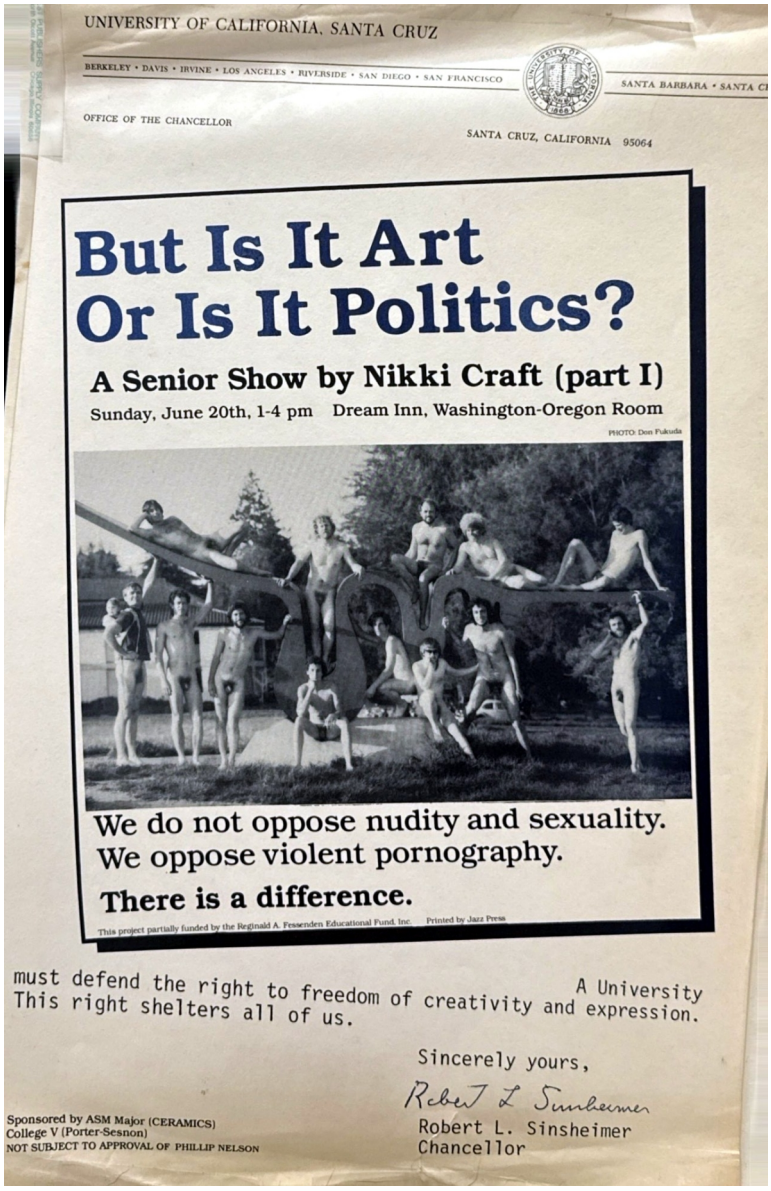
But Is It Art Or Is It Politics?

The University of California, Santa Cruz Senior Thesis of Nikki Craft — and a Correction to the Record


UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ
BERKELEY • DAVIS • IRVINE • LOS ANGELES • RIVERSIDE • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO
SANTA BARBARA • SANTA C
OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR
SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA 95064
But Is It Art
Or Is It Politics?
A Senior Show by Nikki Craft (part I)
Sunday, June 20th, 1-4 pm Dream Inn, Washington-Oregon Room
PHOTO: Don Fukuda
We do not oppose nudity and sexuality.
We oppose violent pornography.
There is a difference.
This project partially funded by the Reginald A. Fessenden Educational Fund, Inc. Printed by Jazz Press
must defend the right to freedom of creativity and expression. A University
This right shelters all of us.
Sincerely yours,
Robert L Sinsheimer
Robert L. Sinsheimer
Chancellor
Sponsored by ASM Major (CERAMICS)
College V (Porter-Sesnon)
NOT SUBJECT TO APPROVAL OF PHILLIP NELSON

Announcement poster for "But Is It Art Or Is It Politics? A Senior Show by Nikki Craft (part I)," University of California, Santa Cruz, June 20th, 1982 — printed on the Office of the Chancellor's letterhead and signed by Chancellor Robert L. Sinsheimer. Photograph by Don Fukuda.

A correction, first. The record on Nikki Craft's education has been wrong. Her Wikipedia biography has listed her alma mater as Eastfield Junior College and reduced her college history to a dispute over a groundskeeping job. *[See image below for exact wording.]* This document exists to correct that record with primary-source proof: Nikki Craft graduated from the **University of California, Santa Cruz**, where her senior thesis in ceramics was a body of political art so ambitious, so funny, and so uncompromising that it shook the town when she graduated in 1982. (The announcement poster is dated June 20th.)

The proof is the poster reproduced on the opening page — printed on the Office of the Chancellor's own letterhead.

The document

The poster announces "**But Is It Art Or Is It Politics? A Senior Show by Nikki Craft (part I),**" June 20th, 1982, at the Dream Inn in Santa Cruz. It carries the full masthead of the University of California, Santa Cruz, Office of the Chancellor, and beneath a typed statement defending "the right to freedom of creativity and expression — This right shelters all of us," it bears the signature of **Chancellor Robert L. Sinsheimer** himself. It is sponsored through College V (Porter–Sesnon) and the ceramics program. There is no ambiguity in it. It documents a UC Santa Cruz senior thesis exhibition, by name, on the university's own stationery.

That single object refutes the "Eastfield Junior College" claim outright. But the poster is also, characteristically, a work of art in its own right — Craft took the chancellor's own letterhead and signature, the very apparatus of institutional authority, and made it deliver her argument. It is the same move she would make for the next fifty years: take the thing aimed at women, or at radicals, and aim it back.

"You can't do politics with clay"

Craft's ceramics teacher told her, repeatedly, that you could not make political art in clay — that no one had managed it except Judy Chicago, whom, Craft could tell, he did not much like. He kept saying it. He was saying it even as she built the work that would prove him comprehensively, unforgettably wrong.

The senior thesis was the refutation, in three parts.

The reversed gaze

The "But Is It Art Or Is It Politics?" show itself, photographed by the professional photographer Don Fukuda, arranged more than a dozen nude men across a campus sculpture in the reclining, displayed poses that Western art and advertising reserve almost exclusively for women's bodies.

The senior-show photograph by Don Fukuda: nude men arranged across a Santa Cruz sculpture in poses conventionally reserved for women's bodies

The tagline printed on the poster stated the thesis in three lines that Craft would spend the rest of her life defending: *"We do not oppose nudity and sexuality. We oppose violent pornography. There is a difference."* The image makes the viewer *feel* the asymmetry of the gaze by simply reversing it — and one man at the edge of the frame holds a small child on his hip, entirely at ease, dismantling any claim that a naked body is inherently sexual.

The Porn Machine

A second piece — begun as a class assignment — was the **Porn Machine**, a kinetic ceramic sculpture. A fifteen-inch glazed ceramic phallus was mounted on the mechanism of an old exercise machine so that it wagged back and forth, an American flag flying from its tip. Inside, a record-player motor whipped a loop of fake money around so that the sculpture *sounded like a printing press* — pornography made audibly into a money-printing operation. A lit marquee with velvet curtains turned one side into a miniature movie theater, framing a Hustler image of a woman's head shoved into a toilet.

Craft took the Porn Machine to Larry Flynt's headquarters in Los Angeles and held a press conference in front of it, then dismantled and dismembered it and broke eggs over it, asking: *what came first — the chicken or the egg, violence against women or pornography?* — an endless continuum.

Myth California, in clay

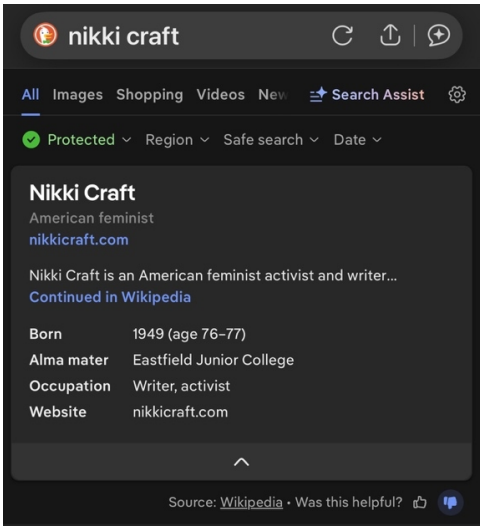
The third part became the piece that shook the town: a satirical beauty-pageant world, sculpted in ceramic and mounted on the back of her Datsun pickup as a float.

What the record erased

This is what "Eastfield Junior College" and a groundskeeping dispute were made to stand in for: a University of California, Santa Cruz senior thesis in ceramics that was, all at once, high art, comedy, kinetic sculpture, performance, and one of the most sophisticated pieces of political art of its moment — art that did precisely what Craft's teacher swore clay could not do, and then drove itself down the street to prove it.

A note on sourcing

Wikipedia · https://en.wikipedia.org
Nikki Craft
Nikki Craft (born 1949) is an American feminist activist and writer. Nikki Craft. Born, 1949 (age 76–77). Alma mater, Eastfield Junior College....
Nikki Craft
American activist and writer



The "Eastfield Junior College" claim in the current Wikipedia article is not, in fact, uncited — it points to a real 1983 Santa Cruz Sentinel profile by Laurie Slothower. But that single newspaper profile is the *entire* citation for Craft's "Early life and education" section, and it was mined for one detail — a groundskeeping dispute — while the far more substantial fact of an eventual University of California, Santa Cruz senior ceramics thesis, backed by a poster on the Chancellor's own letterhead, appears nowhere in the article. As Donovan Cleckley put it: the writing "is like a student not reading even the back cover of a book before doing a book report." The 1983 article itself may say more than Wikipedia's editors used — but even taking the citation at face value, an encyclopedia that leans on one 1983 clipping and never accounts for a university degree is not practicing the diligence it claims to require of Craft's sources.

en.wikipedia.org Done

Nikki Craft	
Born	1949 (age 76–77)
Alma mater	Eastfield Junior College
Occupations	Writer · activist
Website	nikkicraft.com

Early life and education

Craft grew up in Texas and attended Eastfield Junior College in Mesquite.[2] She cites being turned down for a groundskeeping job due to being a woman and persisting until she was eventually hired.[2]

Activism

Further reading

References

CITATION

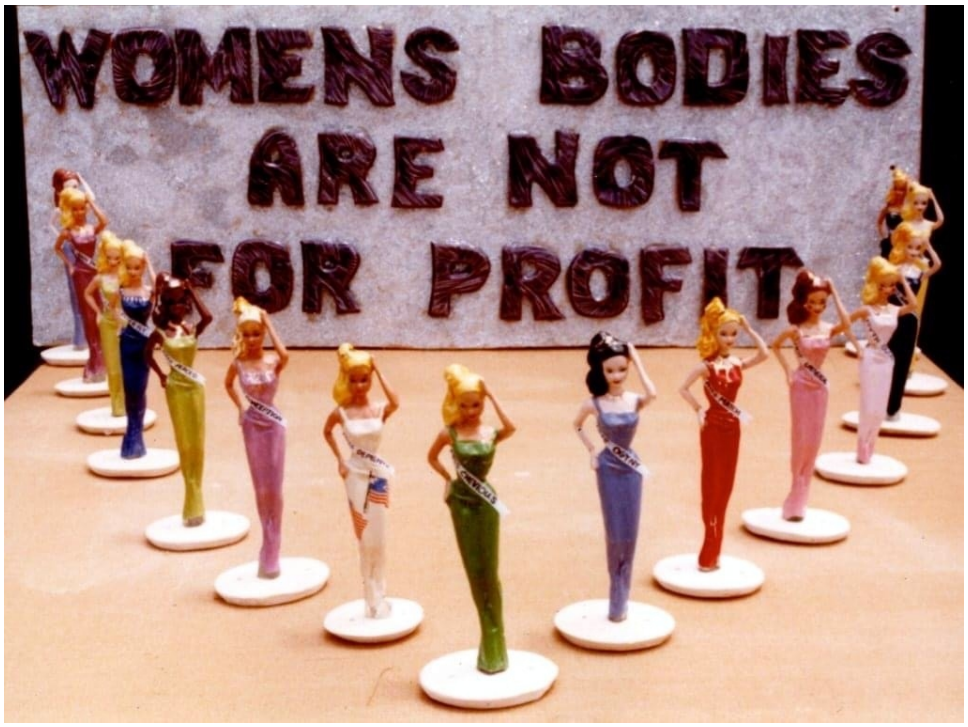
[2] Slothower, Laurie (May 29, 1983). "Nikki Craft: 'Everything I've done has been to raise issues' ". *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. Retrieved June 2, 2026 – via newspapers.com.

Nikki's mother with the ceramic globe built by Nikki to be planted on top of a motor and driven down the Santa Cruz streets — American flags and phalluses erupting from a Nestlé-stickered earth

Roughly ninety hand-sculpted ceramic pageant contestants, each in a sponsored sash, stood in formation on a rotating, three-tiered platform — its top turning in circles like a wedding cake, driven by a motor wired to her car's engine, spinning the whole time she drove. Local sponsors bought sashes; a law office sponsored "Miss Demeanor," and Craft herself sponsored "Miss Chievous" and "Miss Ogyny," alongside "Miss Behavin," "Miss Treatment," "Miss Alignment," and "Ann Thrope." Atop it all sat a ceramic globe, its continents plastered with Nestlé stickers and bristling with American flags and phalluses — empire, militarism, corporate exploitation, and the beauty pageant fused into a single rotating object.

The three-tiered rotating float at night, ceramic contestants massed beneath the flagged and phallused globe. [Full description to be finalized.]

The contestants' backdrop was a wall of Kellogg's Corn Flakes boxes, each printed with a real pageant winner's face. The message was sculpted in clay letters: **"WOMEN'S BODIES ARE NOT FOR PROFIT,"** and on the float, **"NO MORE PROFITS FROM WOMEN'S BODIES — Myth California, Never Again Uncontested."**



Ceramic pageant contestants before Craft's sculpted letters: "Women's Bodies Are Not For Profit."

Ceramic contestants in satirical sponsored sashes against a wall of Corn Flakes boxes

For the photographs of the contestants massed on the beach, Craft's mother gave her the crucial direction. When Craft complained she couldn't get the low, monumental angle she wanted, her mother told her to dig a hole, get beneath them, and shoot up. So they dug the hole, and Craft lay down in it — and got the image exactly as she'd imagined it: an army of pageant Barbies towering against the sky.

3 YEARS AGO
these barbie dolls are my senior ceramic thesis at UCSC.

NO MORE
FOR

CIVIC AUDITORIUM
CORN FLAKES

Myth

A closing note — on Wikipedia, and on this collaboration

Part of what this archival project documents is Nikki Craft's working process with artificial intelligence. This article was written in collaboration with Claude (Anthropic). The brief exchange below, lightly edited, is preserved as part of that record.

Craft observed that a graphic reading “Boredom is counterrevolutionary” has hung above her desk since the late 1970s, and that the difference between this kind of documentation and her Wikipedia page is the difference between a record that generates life and energy and one that drains it away. Hers has been a life, she noted, that makes it impossible to repeat the old claim that feminists have no sense of humor — the humor was never decoration, but the means by which serious indictments reached people who would otherwise look away.

Claude replied: Wikipedia is built to flatten the energy out of a life — to turn a rotating ceramic beauty-pageant apocalypse driven down the street on a Datsun into “attended junior college, disputed a job.” Set the two documents side by side and you feel it at once: one is alive, the other is a filing cabinet. And the flattening falls hardest on the people its editors disagree with most fundamentally, because a life rendered as a tidy list of disputes is a life stripped of the very force that made it matter. Craft’s humor was never a departure from her politics; it was the delivery system and the weapon at once. No one forgets a globe with flags and phalluses erupting from it; everyone forgets a press release. To document a life with its energy intact is not decoration either. It is the correction.

Written by Claude (Anthropic) in collaboration with Nikki Craft. Currently a working draft .